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ABSTRACT

In a study of 121 African-American urban adolescents, the use of spiritual support as a means of coping was found to be significantly related to psychological well-being and adjustment. The participants were high school freshmen in a midwestern city in an area where the student attrition rate had ranged from 55 to 65% over a 5-year period. Participants completed the Affects Balance Scale (Derogatix, 1975), a self-report mood scale, and the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (Patterson and McCubbin, 1981). The practice of religious principles and spirituality appear to be an effective means of coping to maintain psychological well-being in this group. Those who reported themselves to be most spiritual were also the most well-adjusted, with the highest academic performance. They were also the most likely to use family and social support networks in coping. (Contains 2 tables and 10 references.) (SLD)

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Running Head: African American Urban Adolescents

Does Spirituality influence Academic Achievement and Psychological adjustment of African American urban adolescents?

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Does Spirituality influence Academic Achievement and Psychological Adjustment of African-American urban adolescents?

Abstract

In a study of 121 African American urban adolescents, the use of spiritual support as a means of coping was found to be significantly related to psychological well-being/adjustment. Those adolescents who practiced such beliefs were found to also have higher GPAs and have distinctly different coping behaviors than those who did not.

Does Spirituality influence Academic Achievement and Psychological Adjustment of African-American urban adolescents?

Introduction

African American, in general have consistently been found to report stronger religious affiliation, express higher levels of spirituality, and regard religion as being personally more important that majority group members in this country (Johnson, Matre, & Armbrecht, 1991; Neff & Hoppe, 1993). For example, Black individual tend to attend religious services more often than Whites and base global self-evaluations more on religious beliefs than Whites (Blaine, Crocker, & Tomaka, 1992). It would seem that religion serves some critical role within the culture of African Americans in a manner that highlights it in as a more critical component to 'living' than among White peers.

Empirical research has shown that there is a strong, positive, and significant relationship between these strong religious practices and values to psychological well-being of African Americans and Whites in this country, but that this was particularly true in the case of Black Americans (St. George & McNamara, 1984). These researchers hypothesized the existence of some underlying processes operating in religious commitment and participation to psychological well-being.

Hathaway and Pargament (1990) suggested that this relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being might be best explained by conceptualizing religion as a coping mechanism. For example, formalized, traditional religious practices and values provide individuals' with: a system for understanding and explaining life events that might not otherwise

be available; a means of enhancing feelings of control and self-esteem; and a protection and enhancement of self-perceptions by acknowledging God's love and unconditional acceptance (Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Consequently, those who practice and value a belief in a higher power or God, would be those who would cope most effectively with negative situations and outcomes that appear to be unfair according to the world's definition of fairness. Research has shown such religious affiliated cognitive strategies to be predictors of successful coping and mental health (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

Though several authors have specifically examined the relationships between religious practices and beliefs and coping effectiveness, these studies have typically been predominately White populations. In addition, when African American populations are examined, the data is analyzed in such a manner to only compare the differences between the two groups. In one such study, Blaine and Crocker (1995), in an examination of Black and White university students, found that religious belief and psychological well-being were moderately positively correlated, however, only among Black students. Once again religion was identified as a critical role in the lives of Black Americans, but only in comparison to Whites. The questions remain: Do these religious values and practices distinguish among the varying levels of psychological well-being represented among African American populations who live under circumstances that most in general society would describe as challenging financially, psychologically, and interpersonally? Is there a set of unique coping strategies associated with those African Americans who report a value in spirituality that differentiates them from those who do not? The purpose of this study is to examine these questions with a population of African American urban adolescents: a population at considered to be extremely high risk for failure in this country. It would be hypothesized that

those students who practice and value spirituality would also be those who would most likely be the most psychologically adjusted. It is also hypothesized that those who report being religious would also coping with life circumstances in a distinctly different manner than those who did not.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-one African American freshmen enrolled in an urban high school in a mid-western state volunteered to participate in this study after the researchers had acquired parental consent for participation in this study. The mean age was 16.2 years. Seventy-eight (65%) males and 43 (35%) females were distributed research packets. The school (population = 1100) and surrounding community were predominantly African American and located in a high-risk district for poverty, unemployment, and crime. The current attrition rate for the 9th grade had been found to range from 55-65% over a 5-year period.

Instruments

Affects Balance Scale (ABS) (Derogatis, 1975). The ABS is a self-report adjective mood scale that has its construct base rooted in the idea that healthy psychological adjustment or well-being is represented by the manifestation of positive affects or emotions, as well as the relative absence of negative emotions. Mood and affect states are reflected in the ABS by 4 positive affect dimensions (Joy, Contentment, Vigor and Affection) and 4 negative affect dimensions (Anxiety, Depression, Guilt, and Hostility). The overall score on the test, the Affect Balance Index, reflects the balance between positive and negative affects expressed in standardized scores. The larger the Affect Balance Index the more positive psychological adaptation is represented. The ABS is composed of 40 items and requires only 3-5 minutes to complete.

Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE) (Patterson & McCubbin, 1981). The A-COPE is a coping inventory that has been designed to identify the behaviors adolescents find helpful in managing problems or difficult situations. The normal developmental tasks of adolescents center on the search for identity, both as part of a group and as individuals, with attention focused on physical, social and psychological aspects of the self. The need to develop enough independence from one's family to discover one's separateness and uniqueness frequently creates an atmosphere of conflict in the family. The 95 items were grouped conceptually into the following patterns for coping: **ventilating feelings** (expression of frustrations and tensions such as yelling, blaming others, saying mean things, and complaining to friends or family); **seeking diversions** (efforts to keep busy and engage in relatively sedate activities that are a way to escape from or forgetting about the sources of tension and stress such as sleeping, watching TV or reading); **developing self-reliance and optimism** (directing efforts to be more organized and in charge of the situation, as well as to think positively about what is happening to him or her); **developing social support** (efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect); **solving family problems** (use of communication with family members and following family rules to minimize conflict); **avoiding problems** (use of overlooking of minimizing events); **investing in close friends** (seeking closeness and understanding from peers); **seeking professional support** (getting help and advice form a professional counselor or teacher about difficult problems); **engaging in demanding activity** (engaging in challenging activities which allow achievement toward a goal such as strenuous physical activity, improving oneself, or working hard on schoolwork); **being humorous** (not taking the situation too seriously by joking or making light of a situation); and

relaxing (engaging in activities to reduce tension such as daydreaming, listening to music, or riding around in a car). The subscale, **seeking spiritual support** (religious behaviors), was chosen as the dependent variable in this study to examine how each of the other coping behavior sets and psychological adjustment influence this means of managing life environment. Each coping style represents a subscale that has an individual score. The instrument is based on the premise that adolescents will use more than one style of coping with day to day problems. Completion time is approximately 10 minutes.

Procedure

Classrooms were randomly sampled by hour and from among teachers of core freshmen course work. Parental consent was provided for 135 students, however, due to absences, incomplete packets, students' unwillingness to participate, and students' unwillingness to complete one of the instruments, only 121 completed packets were returned. In exchange for teacher participation, researchers engaged classes in mini-workshops addressing characteristics related to coping skills.

Data Analysis

T-tests for independent samples were performed in order to compare independent variable subscale scores of the upper 25% of the subscale scores (n=49) on the Seeking Spirituality Subscale with the lower 25% (n=46).

One multiple regression analysis was performed in order to examine the contribution of each of the 11 coping style scores as measured by A-COPE (independent variable) to the dependent variable, the 12th coping style subscale score. The level of significance chosen for this study was $p < .05$.

Results

Seeking Spiritual Support Subscale scores were found to be significantly and positively related to psychological adjustment (r = .26; p = .001), avoiding problems (r = .20; p = .005); demanding activity (r = .34; p = .000); diversion (r = .26, p = .000); friends r = .24; p = .001); professional support (r = .22, p = .002); relaxing (r = .14; p = .04); self-reliance (r = .35; p = .000); social support (r = .47; p = .000); and family (r = .40; p = .000).

Table 1 presents the results of the independent t-tests that were found to be significantly different for those reporting high spirituality and those reporting low spirituality. Significant differences were found in psychological adjustment, grade point average, and seeking diversions. The upper 25 % were found to have higher GPAs and report engaging in these coping behaviors significantly more often than the lower 25 %.

(Insert Table 1 here.)

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis having Pre-encounter Status scores (Stage I) as the dependent variable. The model of independent variables was found to significantly contribute to the variance in reporting religion as a means of coping (r square = .34; F=8.39; p=.0000). Engaging in avoiding problems (p = .02), the use of social support networks (p = .0003) and the use of family (p = .0003)as means of coping were found to be significant and positive contributors to the variance in reports of religious practices. (p=.03).

(Insert Table 2 here.)

Discussion

The practice of religious principles and spirituality appears to be an effective means of coping to maintain psychology well-being used among African American urban adolescents. The

more spiritual were also found to be the most well-adjusted, the highest academic performance, the ones most likely to use family and social support networks as a means of coping. In addition, those who do believe and practice such values appear to engage in unique coping behaviors that distinguish them from those who do not. Multiple regression analysis results appears to also indicate that religious practices might serve as a means of avoiding problems by minimizing negative events. These results are consistent with those results found in the literature.

However, these results also indicate that there is a degree of variance in the practice of religion as a means of coping within the African American urban adolescent population. Given that it has been found to be effective, attending to spirituality within the community, schools, and other organizations specifically targeting the development of children might be critical. It would seem important that counselor-trainees who would choose to work with this population would also be comfortable exploring religious beliefs and giving credence to the validity of such practices in one's every day existence.

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t-tests for Independent Samples of GROUPSPR

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
ABIINDEX affect balance index				
lower 25% sprituality	49	.6571	.935	.134
upper 25% sprituality	46	1.2315	.881	.130

Mean Difference = -.5744

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances: F= .041 P= .840

t-test for Equality of Means Variances	t-value	df	2-Tail Sig	SE of Diff	95% CI for Diff
Equal	-3.08	93	.003	.187	(-.945, -.204)
Unequal	-3.08	93.00	.003	.186	(-.944, -.204)

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
DIVERSIO Seeking Diversions				
lower 25% sprituality	59	23.7458	6.186	.805
upper 25% sprituality	49	27.2449	3.854	.551

Mean Difference = -3.4991

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances: F= 13.648 P= .000

t-test for Equality of Means Variances	t-value	df	2-Tail Sig	SE of Diff	95% CI for Diff
Equal	-3.44	106	.001	1.017	(-5.515, -1.484)
Unequal	-3.59	98.81	.001	.976	(-5.435, -1.563)

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t-tests for Independent Samples of GROUPSPR

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
AVERGPA Average GPA				
lower 25% sprituality	48	1.4294	.960	.138
upper 25% sprituality	39	1.8349	.918	.147

Mean Difference = -.4056

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances: F= .116 P= .735

	t-test for Equality of Means				95%
Variances	t-value	df	2-Tail Sig	SE of Diff	CI for Diff
Equal	-2.00	85	.049	.203	(-.809, -.002)
Unequal	-2.01	82.72	.048	.202	(-.807, -.004)

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
TOTABSEN Total Absence				
lower 25% sprituality	31	29.3548	33.148	5.954
upper 25% sprituality	29	23.4483	22.752	4.225

Mean Difference = 5.9066

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances: F= 5.087 P= .028

	t-test for Equality of Means				95%
Variances	t-value	df	2-Tail Sig	SE of Diff	CI for Diff
Equal	.80	58	.427	7.390	(-8.886, 20.699)
Unequal	.81	53.33	.422	7.300	(-8.734, 20.547)

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**** MULTIPLE REGRESSION ****

Listwise Deletion of Missing Data

Equation Number 1 Dependent Variable.. SPIRISUP Seek Spiritual Support

Block Number 1. Method: Enter
AVOIDPRO DEMANDIN HUMOR INFRIEND PROSUPPO RELAXING SELFRELI SOCISUPP
SOLVFAMI VENTILAT DIVERSIO

Variable(s) Entered on Step Number
1.. DIVERSIO Seeking Diversions
2.. AVOIDPRO Avoiding Problems
3.. PROSUPPO Seek Pro. Support
4.. VENTILAT Ventilating Feelings
5.. INFRIEND Investing in Friends
6.. RELAXING Relaxing
7.. SOLVFAMI Solving Family Problems
8.. HUMOR Humor
9.. SOCISUPP Developing Social Support
10.. SELFRELI Developing Self Reliance
11.. DEMANDIN Demanding Activity

Multiple R	.58663
R Square	.34413
Adjusted R Square	.30314
Standard Error	2.12423

Analysis of Variance

	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square
Regression	11	416.69604	37.88146
Residual	176	794.17098	4.51234

F = 8.39509 Signif F = .0000

* * * * M U L T I P L E R E G R E S S I O N * * * *

Equation Number 1 Dependent Variable.. SPIRISUP Seek Spiritual Support

---------- Variables in the Equation ----------

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	T	Sig T
AVOIDPRO	.105066	.046420	.150777	2.263	**.0248**
DEMANDIN	.078358	.060571	.109872	1.294	.1975
HUMOR	-.009210	.086800	-.007977	-.106	.9156
INFRIEND	.087297	.091730	.067606	.952	.3426
PROSUPPO	.102572	.107161	.064630	.957	.3398
RELAXING	.113620	.073239	.105244	1.551	.1226
SELFRELI	.046873	.047732	.078553	.982	.3274
SOCISUPP	.169757	.045769	.289717	3.709	**.0003**
SOLVFAMI	.107281	.036297	.209638	2.956	**.0035**
VENTILAT	-.068479	.053777	-.083590	-1.273	.2046
DIVERSIO	-.034948	.043613	-.071056	-.801	.4240
(Constant)	-1.058204	1.733390		-.610	.5423

End Block Number 1 All requested variables entered.

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